A Dominie in the Foothills

By

W. Everard Edmonds

After changing cars at Dunmore Junction, Bull's Head, recalling buffalo days, had been the first stop. Darkness had fallen and I had just begun to doze when the clamorous brakeman called out "Seven Persons" in tones loud enough to rouse the fabled Seven Sleepers. Really, this would never do; I must keep awake or I should miss my station. To fortify myself in this resolve, I drew from my pocket for the hundredth time a yellow slip bearing these remarkable words: "Application for Mountain View accepted, come immediately, change at Dunmore."

Only a child of the older East who has long looked upon the West as the Garden of the Hesperides can realize what that brief message meant to me in the year of our Lord, 1896. It stood for adventure, spelled with a capital "A"; for romance written in letters in red. Visions of Indians, trappers and cowboys floated before my eyes, and long-restrained, primitive desires surged within my breast. A year's experience as a teacher in an Eastern county school had but served to whet my appetite for the golden West, and when I saw a fugitive advertisement for a teacher at Mountain View, Alberta, I replied within the hour. My star must have been in the ascendant, or western teachers scarce, for my application was accepted

by wire. With this telegram as a token and pledge I had set out like the patriarch of old, not knowing exactly whither I went. And now here I was, armed with a first-class certificate and a plentiful supply of ammunition in the form of dog-eared textbooks, about to go "over the top" into the mysterious No Man's Land of my dreams.

I was roused from my reverie by the entrance of the conductor. When he came to examine my ticket, I told him it had been collected at Dunmore, and that I wished to purchase a new one to Mountain View.

"Mountain View!" he ejaculated. "There's no such station on the C.P.R. Better stay on till we get to Lethbridge! That's the end of the line, and maybe someone there can tell you. I've traveled from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but I've never heard of Mountain View."

Never heard of Mountain View! I had not imagined for a moment that it was off the railway line, but the conductor should know if anyone did, and I concluded to follow his instructions. I could keep awake no longer, and when the train arrived at its destination two hours late, I was again rudely awakened by that howling Dervish in the garb of a brakeman. Fortunately I was able to secure a room to myself at the hotel, where I learned that Mountain View was up among the foothills of the Rockies, about seventy-five miles away. Thus comforted, I went to bed and slept soundly until morning.

Lethbridge, I learned, was an important distributing centre for freight, and the latest census gave it a population of fifteen hundred souls. It was also an important coal-mining centre, the Galt mines having been the first to open in Southern Alberta. Besides the "Turkey Trail" to Dunmore, there was another railway line running south to Great Falls, Montana. So though modern conveniences were somewhat lacking, the town was in constant touch with the outside world. The Alberta Railway and Irrigation Company had been responsible for much of this development, and at this time had a most capable manager in the person of Mr. C. A. Magrath, now more widely known.

My right-hand neighbor at breakfast was a man of somewhere between fifty and sixty, whose dry humor and shrewd observations immediately attracted my attention. The long gray beard sweeping his breast gave him a striking resemblance to one of the old Hebrew prophets, and I was not greatly astonished to hear that he was the Moses of a new immigration into the Canadian Promised Land. This patriarchal stranger was Charles Ora Card, the founder of Cardston, and the president of the Mormon Church in Canada. When he learned that I was the new teacher at Mountain View, he told me that the settlement was only fifteen miles beyond his own home, and that he would be pleased to take me to Cardston with him that day. I gladly accepted his kind offer, and we arranged to set out an hour before noon.

I took advantage of the brief respite allowed me to do some shopping and to write a long letter home. At the post office I met Mr. J. D. Higinbotham, who had settled in Lethbridge in 1885. He and his brother "Ed" opened the first drug store, and had charge of the first post office in this part of the country. Mr. Higinbotham introduced me to another old-timer who came in at that moment, a prosperous-looking rancher, who informed me that his brother was a noted Cornish wrestler. "He wrestled before Queen Victoria one time," said he, "and the good old Queen got quite strick on him."

The business part of Lethbridge extended down one long street, with the stores facing a big, open square. I was struck by the great number of horses. Every now and then a big freight-wagon would draw up to the sidewalk, and if the driver were in no immediate hurry, he would unhitch his horses, two, four, six, or eight as the case might be, and turn them loose to graze in the square.

When I returned to the hotel, Mr. Card was tucking various parcels under the seat of his buckboard, and in a few minutes we were -- to use a western phrase which immediately caught my fancy -- "hitting the trail". It was a beautiful September day, the roads were good, and we bowled along merrily until two o'clock, when we stopped for lunch and a brief rest. Not a fence was to be seen anywhere, and houses were conspicuous by their absence. The prairie was treeless, slightly rolling and covered with a species of bunch grass which, my companion informed me, made it one of the finest cattle countries in the

world. The snow remains but a short time in ordinary seasons, and the cattle are thus able to run out all winter. Indeed, a heavy snowfall may be carried away in a single night by a strong chinook wind.

We reached Cardston shortly after sundown, and I put up for the night at the new hotel then in course of construction and kept by "Brother" Woolf, the Bishop of the Mormon Church in this new "stake" of Zion. Cardston at this time was a pretty raw-looking town, the most important buildings being the co-operative store, and the meeting-house on the hill. Most of the inhabitants were engaged in ranching, and at the hotel I met my first cowboy, a long, lanky, somewhat silent individual who was temporarily incapacitated for work by an injured wrist and a broken collar-bone.

Next morning mine host Woolf drove me out to the scene of my future labors. As I drew near my destination the country became more hilly, and I quite lost count of the number of little lakes on every side. Great herds of cattle grazed along the hillsides, and flocks of wild fowl flew restlessly from slough to slough. The mountains grew steadily larger, and as we topped a higher hill than usual I saw before me a beautiful green valley with a little mountain creek running through it like a ribbon of silver. A dozen log houses were scattered along its winding course, with a larger one at the very end. At the sight of the latter my heart gave a sudden bound; for what teacher could fail to recognize that classic style of architecture. It was the schoolhouse of Mountain View.

The life of the ordinary human being is chiefly conditioned by two prime factors, heredity and environment. In the case of the rural teacher a third element enters in, and as the time-honored custom of "boarding round" has steadily declined in popularity since the days of Ichabod Crane, it often bulks larger than the other two. I refer, of course, to the school-teacher's boarding-place. In this respect I was singularly fortunate in being able to secure comfortable quarters at the home of the largest rancher in the district. His wife had been a "school marm" once upon a time, and both did their best to make me feel thoroughly at home.

The population of this little pioneer community consisted of two distinct classes: a few well-to-do American ranchers from Montana and Idaho, and the larger number, of Mormon settlers from Utah. The latter had but lately come into the foothill country, and they were just beginning to get a start when I arrived. Between them and "the Gentiles" there was a great gulf fixed in religious matters, but in the everyday affairs of life they mingled on equal terms.

Of course there were a few who could not be placed in either of these categories. For example there was big "rocky" Belvidere who lad left Missouri fiften years back, when he found it "getting too crowded". Rocky ran a sawmill and freighted by turns, and it was really a treat to watch him drive a four-horse team. Over near the Waterton Lakes dwelt "Kootenai" Brown, duplicating Thoreau's happy hermit existence by Walden Pond. Then there was the inevitable "remittance man", the man who gets money from the Old Land, with all the virtues and vices

of his class. This one was the grandson of a distinguished London surgeon, whose name will always be associated with that of a certain disease still pronounced incurable. A small sprinkling of Canadians mingled with the rest, and gallantly upheld the torch of "down-east" civilization.

The school children were like school children the world over. About forty in number, their ages ranged from six to sixteen. There was, it is true, one seventeen-year-old girl, but she should hardly be counted, as she was married before my year was up.

That was a memorable wedding. Friends came from far and near, and "there was a sound of revelry by night". The Presbyterian minister had been brought up from Cardston to tie the knot, and he arrived in the midst of a pouring rain. Nothing, however, could dampen the spirits of the good-natured crowd, and the ceremony over, the fun at supper waxed hilarious. I had been asked to toast the bride, but in the general excitement had quite forgotten my duty until during a momentary lull in the conversation, the father of the bride turned to me and said in a sepulchral whisper, "Would you like to speak now. or shall we let the young folks enjoy themselves a little longer?"

"Among those present" was a sister of the bride, a little girl of eight years old, who was my brightest pupil. This clever child found it comparatively easy to pass through three grades in six months, and her father's pride in her ability found an echo in the ear of at least one sympathetic listener

when he said, "That little girl of mine, the minute she's home from school, sits at the table with her books in front of her, a newspaper on one side and a magazine on the other -- reading them all at the same time, by jinks." In a school essay on "Our Village", this precocious youngster called attention to the weeds which grew in rank profusion on the sod roofs of the houses, especially one species commonly known as "fat-hen". "In truth," she added, "this is the only kind of poultry that is eaten to any extent -- and that in the form of greens -- by the inhabitants of our village." Today, Isabel Patterson, the writer of that little essay, is on the staff of one of New York's leading newspapers, and two charming books bear witness to her literary ability.

The Rev. Gavin Hamilton, the Presbyterian minister at Cardston, came now and then to take a service at Mountain View. Unselfish, kindly, the very essence of good-nature, he was at the same time the most absent-minded of men. There was only one man, I think, who out-distanced him in this respect, and, strange to say, I met him first at Mr. Hamilton's own table. This was a mounted policeman, known generally as "Doc", who was stationed at that time on the St. Mary's River. One day "Doc" arrived at the detachment leading a pack horse behind his own favorite roan. He had just dismounted when he remembered that he had intended to water the steeds at the river, a good half-mile away. Remounting the roan he galloped down to the river bank, and then suddenly remembered that he should have brought along the pack horse as well. Wheeling round, he cantered back to the detachment, dismounted, and started off on

foot, leading the thirsty pack horse behind him. On reaching the river once more, he discovered that he had left the roan behind. . . . The sergeant in charge at the detachment, who had been an interested spectator of the whole proceeding, swore on the honor of an ex-country cricketer that "Doc" made ten good runs before his task was accomplished.

I saw a good deal of the work of the Mounted Police Force in Southern Alberta, and gleaned something of its history from Captain Deane, then in charge at Lethbridge. From the day of its organization the N.W.M.P. had been the stamping-ground of adventurous spirits drawn from all parts of the world. The members of the force were essentially soldiers, but they also acted as magistrates, sheriffs, license inspectors, fire wardens, health officers and game wardens. There is no record that any officer ever died of having nothing to do. In the suppression of smuggling and illicit trade with the Indians, in the regular patrol of the settlements and reserves, and in the enforcement of quarantine regulations and game laws, there was plenty of scope for activity the whole year round.

It would be difficult to find in any corps in the world an assemblage of characters offering a greater variety than was to be met with in the ranks of the Mounted Police. On the payrolls were to be seen the names of novelists, artists, "honorables", Oxford and Cambridge graduates; sons of admirals, generals, bishops and statesmen; former officers of the militia and volunteer corps of Canada and Great Britian, as well as ex-officers of the armies of several continental countries.

One would naturally expect tact and diplomacy above the average among such a body of men, and numerous incidents in the annals of the Force illustrate the ready wit of its members in dealing with the most difficult situations.

The writer recalls one of these incidents very vividly In the fall of 1896, Charcoal, an Indian on the reserve, shot the farm instructor and escaped to the timber country at the foot of the mountains. For more than six weeks he evaded the Police, and one of the most popular members of the Force, Sergeant Wilde, was shot while attempting to capture him. At length, worn out by continuous riding and lack of food and sleep, Charcoal on a pitch-black night sought his old tepee on the reserve. Here he was recognized and taken captive, ending his life a few weeks later by the hangman's rope.

But one need not enumerate instances of this kind for, after all, the keynote of the entire history of the Force is struck in the story of the constable, a mere boy, who was sent across the prairies in the depth of winter to hunt horses in the Pend d'Oreille. He was overtaken by a blizzard, and several weeks later when the snows had melted, a search-party found his body in a small ravine. His right hand still clasped his notebook on a leaf of which he had scribbled with stiffened fingers: "Lost. Horse dead. Am trying to push on. Have done my best."

Am trying to push on --Have done my best. That is the propelling power back of all the work of the Mounted Police. "Maintien le droit" are the words that encircle the buffalo head on the police coat-of-arms, but sanctioned though they

are by colleges of heralds and the traditions of centuries, they lack the stirring force of the dying message of the young constable who had failed, knew he had failed, and knew too, that he had done his best.